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ABSTRACT

This report examined the effects of implementation of England's National Curriculum requirements on teachers, students, teaching methods, and classroom organization. Most teachers accepted the National Curriculum in principle, while at the same time reporting problems regarding pace and extent of changes. Changes in teaching approach and philosophy, teachers' working day, record keeping, assessment, planning, and curriculum content were reported. Teachers were tightening classroom control, providing more direction to children's activities, using more group and whole-class teaching, and providing less scope for individual choice and self-directed study. Students' responses to the implementation of the curriculum indicated that while they preferred to control their own activities, most of them recognized classroom life as being framed by tight teacher control. Changes in curriculum reflected a shift toward the core subjects and away from creative areas, with a corresponding feeling of time pressure for teachers and increased student interest in creative activities. Teachers indicated that their relationship with children was adversely affected by pressures on teacher time. Teachers either had mixed views about the development of primary education in the next 5 to 10 years, or were pessimistic, feeling that changes would lead to a loss of autonomy and a narrowing of the teachers' role. (SH)

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PRIMARY ASSESSMENT, CURRICULUM AND EXPERIENCE

A study of educational change under the National Curriculum

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CLASSROOM CHANGE AND PUPIL EXPERIENCE

by

Andrew Pollard and Marilyn Osborn
with Paul Croll, Dorothy Abbott and Patricia Broadfoot

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CLASSROOM CHANGE AND PUPIL EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

This paper is based on two discrete sets of data from the overall PACE study. First, on the analysis of the first round of interviews with 88 classroom teachers in infant schools, conducted in May 1990, and second on the analysis of data from interviews with 48 six year-old children conducted in the Autumn of 1990. In each case, the data is based on answers to specific questions and these preliminary findings will, in due course, be triangulated with observational and documentary evidence.

Many people have speculated that the National Curriculum and associated assessments will change classroom practice in English primary schools in fundamental ways. Such changes, it is proposed, would directly effect curriculum balance but would also impact indirectly on classroom pedagogy, on relationships between teachers and children and on children's experience generally. This paper reviews our initial findings on such issues.

The paper begins with a general review of recent findings concerning the responses of teachers to the introduction of the National Curriculum. It then moves on, more specifically, to consider teaching approaches, classroom organisation, curriculum balance and teacher-pupil relationships. In each section, data from teachers is set alongside that from pupils.

The Responses of Teachers to Curriculum Change

The overall, 'official' account of the responses of primary school teachers to the 1988 Act shows them moving forward constructively and professionally to implement the National Curriculum. Thus an HMI survey of 100 primary schools, conducted in the Autumn of 1989, concludes that ...

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"Overall, about two-thirds of the primary schools inspected were beginning to implement successfully National Curriculum requirements in the core subjects for children in Year 1."

and that ...

"Most teachers were making a determined, conscientious effort to meet their legal and professional obligations to the children and their parents." (HMI 1990:12)

The National Curriculum Council has also begun an evaluation and monitoring programme and some of its Professional Officers have offered conference reports on the results of its pilot study of 33 schools in 8 LEAs during 1990 (eg Webb 1990). The reported findings are broadly similar to those of HMI, with a consistent indication of teachers taking the reforms and trying, sincerely, to implement them.

The initial analysis of interview data from the PACE project also confirmed the generally constructive impression. In the case of the overwhelming majority of teachers interviewed, the introduction of the National Curriculum was supported in principle and it was evident that a very great deal of thought and work was going into its implementation. In some cases it was clear that the full implications of the innovations had not been understood but only in a small number of cases was active opposition to the National Curriculum apparent.

The overall picture then, in 1990, was of teachers in primary schools accepting the broad terms of the National Curriculum and seeking to implement it.

Within this overall picture, however, there were a large number of more specific concerns.

At the top of the list for most teachers was the issue of the pace of change. As we expressed it in an earlier paper when reporting the first findings of the PACE study (Osborne and Pollard, 1990) ...

"Major anxieties were expressed over the pace and extent of the changes. "Too much has been happening too quickly" was the way some teachers put it. While they were developing new ways of working, particularly in the area of record keeping and

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assessment, more information would arrive which would supersede it, meaning that they had wasted their time. This fear of being swamped by change was particularly true of the documentation which accompanied the National Curriculum which was seen by most teachers as "simply overwhelming" - "far too much to assimilate, I have just had to give up on it for the time being" as one teacher put it." (1990:1)

This finding confirms, for the Summer Term of 1990, the existence of the same time pressure which had been reported by HMI in 1989 from a survey of 1000 classes of 5-7 year olds. As they reported ...

"A pressing problem for almost all of the schools was the lack of time for teachers to plan and prepare work, and in the case of subject coordinators to assist their colleagues at the end of the day." (1989: para 10)

This time pressure was combined with the generally conscientious and professional approach of the majority of teachers to produce extremely long working hours. Campbell and Neill (1990), in their study of the working habits of 94 primary teachers during 1990, found that the average hours worked per week was 49 hours, 35 minutes. The distribution of time between types of activity is also interesting (see below) and again indicates the extent of the development work, of one sort or another, presently being undertaken by teachers.

Teaching	35%
Preparation	31%
Administration	29%
In-service	18%
Other	6%

(Campbell and Neill, 1990:33)

Irrespective of the time pressure and hard work which has been involved in the implementation of the National Curriculum, most teachers have welcomed the curricular clarification which it offers. Indeed, the need for curricular breadth and progression seems to have been largely accepted in principle. However, this has itself caused primary school teachers to become aware of some weaknesses in their subject knowledge, particularly in

science and technology. This has been confirmed by two national surveys (Wragg, Bennett and Carre 1989, Croll and Moses 1990).

The most striking feature of primary teachers' responses to the National Curriculum thus remains their general acceptance of it in principle. Contributions to the work of the National Curriculum Subject Working Parties, which met to construct the National Curriculum, were certainly often forthright, but the overall feeling, subject by subject, has been remarkably positive. "Its what we are doing already" or "Its just good practice" are common responses. The result seems to have been that, up to the present time, primary teachers have tended to treat the challenges of implementing the National Curriculum as 'private troubles' (Mills 1949). They have accepted its legitimacy and the 'reasonableness' of its expectations and have thus taken on the personal challenges which it brings.

It is only recently, as the curriculum requirements for History, Geography and other subjects outside the 'core' are being published and as experience of implementation grows, that the issue of curriculum overload, of over-prescription and of integration are beginning to surface as issues in a widespread way. As they do so, the scale, complexity and possible impracticality of the National Curriculum is revealed. Awareness of the changes as 'public issues' is growing - a fact which now seems to be acknowledged by National Curriculum Council in hasty moves to provide advice on curriculum integration.

Considerable uncertainty remains ... will the primary school curriculum become more subject centred? Will the topic-centred approach survive? Will there be more didactic teaching methods as result of time pressure, or will the implementation of the national curriculum require more individual and group teaching? Will the warmth and closeness of teacher-pupil relationships, on which many primary school teachers pride themselves, survive the changes?

The PACE project was designed to address such issues.

Teachers and Teaching

As part of our initial round of interviews with 148 teachers and head teachers, carried out in May 1990, we asked teachers about their classroom practice and how this was being affected by the National Curriculum and Assessment, as well as how they thought it might be further affected in future.

It was striking, that when asked about their approach to teaching, only 23% described their approach as 'child-centred' while 71% saw their teaching style as a mixture of child-centredness and more traditional, formal approaches described as, eg. 'firm but fair' or 'structured but flexible'. The picture presented was of a mixture of philosophies, rather like those described by Galton et al (1980) which included some adherence to 'progressive' ideals. Almost half (48%) of the teachers said that they worked with a variety of different sorts of activities taking place at the same time, and half (48%) also said that they emphasised 'group-based' work compared with only 3% who emphasised whole class work.

At the same time almost a quarter said that their teaching approach "emphasized the basics".

When asked whether their approach had changed at all in response to the implementation of the National Curriculum, 77% mentioned that there had been some degree of change and 23% saw their approach as **very much** changed. Overwhelmingly this change was seen by teachers (76%) as a direct response either to the National Curriculum or to the assessment requirements. This perceived change in teaching approach and philosophy was reflected in changes in classroom practice. For most teachers (87%) the advent of the National Curriculum had resulted in changes to their working day and for 38% these changes had been fairly major. The most important area of change involved more time spent on record keeping. Although this was May, 1990, a year before the national assessment requirements were to be implemented, a significant number said that they were spending more time on assessment. Changes in curriculum content, more time spent at meetings, more planning, and more pressure were all mentioned as important changes.

TABLE 1

Proportion of teachers identifying specific changes in a typical working day

CHANGES	PERCENTAGES
More record keeping	60.2
More assessment	29.7
More meetings	19.3
Change in curriculum content	27.3
Change in teaching methods	6.8
Other (mainly 'more planning' and 'more pressure')	25.0

NOTE: Up to 3 changes were mentioned by any individual teacher. Consequently percentages do not equal 100.

Many teachers expressed frustration and even anger over the amount of time now apparently demanded for record-keeping and assessment. There were fears that this was beginning to "take over from teaching", that the heavy burden demanded in time and effort left too little time for planning, for responding to children, for display work, for all the things which were seen by many as "real teaching". As one teacher put it ...

"If we collect all the National Curriculum documents and we are supposedly implementing them as its stated - I feel that you might as well stop breathing, because are we going to be able to cope? And if we do cope - in what way will we be coping? ... I'd hate to get to the point where I think, 'I must do that today' and 'I'm sorry if Emma comes in crying but she's just got to sit and do it, because the law says I must be doing it'."

This strong feeling that, in spite of the reforms, the greatest sense of satisfaction and achievement in teaching came from children's response was emphasised by the 85% of teachers who said that a "really good day" for them would be one when the children had responded "with interest and enthusiasm", or "with a desire to learn." One teacher said ...

"A good day is when the children are relaxed, happy and have achieved something

they have found difficult for a long time. That's something that is really satisfying. It's a circular thing. Children pick up your relaxation and things go well. If you are not relaxed, everything goes badly."

Classroom Organisation and Control

As Jackson (1968) argued, learning to live in classrooms means for both pupils and teachers "learning to live in a crowd", and while it has always been possible to see a teacher's actions in terms of a response to the crowded conditions of the classroom, this response is likely to be heightened by the increased pressure on teaching time from external demands such as those imposed by the National Curriculum and assessment. We asked teachers how they handled classroom organisation both in terms of the use of individual group and class teaching methods and in terms of the criteria they used for grouping children.

Most teachers used a combination of whole class teaching, group work, and individual work but group work was clearly the main approach. 52% said it was used predominantly in their classrooms and almost all the others said that they used it some of the time. Only one fifth of teachers (21%) used individual teaching as their predominant approach, but 62% used it for at least some of the time. Similarly only 13% used whole class teaching as their predominant approach, but 74% used it for at least some of the time.

Teachers were also asked what criteria they used when they grouped children for different classroom activities. The predominant methods used, by around 40% of teachers for at least some of the time, were grouping on grounds of attainment, in mixed ability, friendship or age. 20% of teachers routinely grouped by attainment for specific curriculum activities, usually maths, but 10% only did it for specific organisational purposes.

Other methods such as grouping by gender and the use of vertical age-grouping were relatively infrequently used with only 2% and 15% respectively indicating that they employed them.

TABLE 2

Percentages of teachers mentioning the following criteria for grouping children.

Attainment grouping	38.6
Mixed ability grouping	35.2
Vertical age grouping	14.8
Friendship grouping	43.2
Gender grouping	2.3
Other (Mostly homogeneous age grouping)	37.5

We also asked how far practices had changed as a response to Education Reform Act. As a result of the act, most who were changing their methods felt that they were depending more on group work and whole class teaching and spending less time on individual work. Table 3 below, illustrates this.

TABLE 3

Percentage of teachers indicating changes in methods of grouping children for teaching purpose.

	Whole Class	Individual	Groups
NA	1.1	1.1	2.3
More	21.6	9.1	28.4
Same	64.8	65.9	65.9
Less	12.5	23.9	3.4

Paradoxically, many felt that they should be doing more individual work as a result of the reforms, but that the time pressure generated by the demands of the National Curriculum and assessment did not allow this.

The teachers then, in response to the pressures of the National Curriculum and assessment, seem to be adapting by tightening their classroom control and by providing

more direction to children's activities. There is more group and whole class teaching, and less scope for individual choice and self-directed study. More group-work is becoming based on attainment levels in particular subjects as teachers seek to organise the provision of a differentiated curriculum.

How then are such developments likely to be appreciated by the children? We interviewed six, six year olds from each school in the 'classroom studies' sample. In answer to the question, 'Do you like it best when you choose what to do or when your teacher does?', over 70% of the children recorded that they preferred to control their own activities. Their answers were direct, simple and unified. They were then asked to explain why they preferred to choose themselves and they gave the following types of account:

TABLE 4

(numbers of responses)

Because its easier to do	2
Because its more interesting	14
Because its my choice	13
Because its good for me	1
Don't know	1
No answer	3

Though the numbers are small the patterns are clear. The children preferred to engage, autonomously, in activities which **they** regard as interesting. Those who emphasised autonomy said things like:

'I like to choose my very best things I like doing.'

'Because you can do what you want.'

'Because you don't have to wait.'

'Cos you can choose to play.'

Those who appreciated scope to choose 'interesting' things to do said:

'Because Miss gives us boring things...'

'Cos you can make things.'

'Cos I can choose nicer things.'

'Cos I like it. More fun. I play with dough.'

'I think it might be because I like playing.'

'Cos you can get at the polydroms and you can stick 'em together.'

The children appear to appreciate opportunities to take decisions, to follow and develop their own ideas, to be creative, have fun and to 'do things'. Their concern for the intrinsic value of activity was contrasted with their view of many teacher-directed activities as being 'boring' and as 'things which we have to do first'.

However, when asked, 'Do you choose what you do at school or does your teacher choose for you most of the time,' the children indicated a high degree of teacher control.

TABLE 5

	(number of responses)
Teacher chooses most of the time	24
Teacher or children choose	17
Children choose most of the time	5
No answer	1

The few children who felt that they choose themselves most of the time all came from the same class and, as with the children who reported shared choice of activities, their views reflected the nature of the organisational system in the classrooms. In many cases, a degree of child choice was overtly provided for in these classroom systems as an attempt to be appreciative of children's needs and to encourage 'independent learning'. The majority of children however, recognised their experience of classroom life as being framed by tight teacher control. As we have seen, they were not universally appreciative of this.

The 30% of children who said that they preferred their teacher to choose their activities gave two types of reason. Two-thirds explained how they liked the activities which the teacher chose. For instance:

'I like it when the teacher chooses 'cos she's nice and chooses good things. She lets us do good work, colouring, playing on computer, playing in the Wendy House, construction, lego.'

The other main reason concerned acceptance of teacher authority: "Well, she's the teacher, so if she chooses we know what to do."

Curriculum Balance

We had anticipated that, as a result of the requirements of the National Curriculum, the balance of the Infant school curriculum was likely to shift towards the 'core' subjects laid down by the Act: maths, English and science, and possibly away from some of the 'creative' areas: art and music, which traditionally were seen as an important part of infant children's daily activities. This expectation was largely borne out by teachers' responses. Although the majority (80%) said that they had always done a lot of maths and English, most teachers (84%) said that they were now doing more science while 60% were doing more technology. There was also a less pronounced move to a more specific emphasis on the humanities, with 34% saying they now did more history and 36% saying this about geography, although many teachers argued that these areas had always been covered in topic work without being **called** history and geography. It was suggested that what was happening now was a more conscious labelling of the history and geography areas of topic work rather than an increase in 'real' terms.

As we had suspected, it was music and art which appeared to be suffering in the move to embrace science. 30% of teachers said they were now doing less art and 30% said the same of music. However, there were other more subtle ways in which the "creative" side of the curriculum appeared to be affected. Although the time spent on English had not changed for most teachers, the type of activity upon which children were engaged as part of English work **had** altered. Many teachers were doing far less creative writing with their children. Similarly, art may well have been eroded more than is apparent from the (30%) response cited above. A large number of teachers said that they were doing less "art for art's sake" with their children. Most said that writing, painting and drawing were now related to topic areas which formed part of their National Curriculum work rather than being open to children's free choice.

As one teacher put it ...

"It's less fun now. Everything has to be specifically related to the topic."

Apart from the change in curriculum balance there was a real issue of curriculum overload for many teachers. With the pressure to do more in the core subjects and the humanities, cutting down the time allocated to music and art did not in itself create enough extra space, since these subjects had never occupied a large proportion of the time available. There was an overwhelming feeling amongst teachers of being constantly pushed for time, of never quite having enough time to fit in all that was required.

The issues of breadth and overload are also evidently concerning HMI who draw attention to the 'continuing need to offer children an appropriate range of experience in the arts and physical education' (HMI 1990:13) and from the interview data which we gathered with the six year-old children, it seems that many of them will be grateful to HMI for expressing such concerns. The children were shown a collage of various common infant school activities and were asked to say which activities they liked doing best and which they did not like. Choice was unrestricted and yielded the table which follows.

TABLE 6

(number of responses)

'Like' 'Don't like'

Physical education	22	2
'Home corner' play	19	6
Painting	16	2
Sand	12	1
Stories	8	4
Construction	7	7
Reading in book-corner	6	2
Singing	4	4
Reading lessons	0	7
Science	2	7
Maths	2	8
Writing	5	11

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The pattern is clear, and it is also rather unfortunate, in view of the pressures which teachers are evidently feeling to emphasise aspects of the curriculum which children seem to 'like' least. Interestingly, each of the core subjects of the National Curriculum is represented at the least liked end of the children's choices.

Full analysis of the data, which will identify the reasoning behind these choices, has not yet been completed. However, it is already clear that children value activity, autonomy, stimulation, engaging with other children, things they can succeed at and opportunities to be creative. For instance:

'I like painting - its not really work, I hate work, I like talking to people.'

'You can play in the sand, but you can't in science and writing.'

'I like PE 'cos you can climb on things, and do all sorts of things.'

'I like dressing up ...'cos you can play schools and stuff in here. Play with Laura, Courtney and Chloe and Faye.'

One might draw particular attention to the release of the imagination and the connection with previous experience which is implicit in many of the priorities given by the children. For instance, one child, said that playing in the sand was her best activity. She went on...

'Because I like making sandcastles when its wet, ...'cos I've been down to the seaside before, and last year I done a big sandcastle ... and me Mum did a big flag so I could do a big flag sandcastle and some people played with me and I had a 'turtle' spade and bucket and we dig right to the bottom and we found treasure and silver.'

Egan's (1989) argument, that the understanding of young children should be linked, through curriculum, to their interest and facility in fantasy and imagination, takes on a direct significance here. The children whom we interviewed confirm his priority. The teachers whom we interviewed felt increasingly unable to respond to such concerns and were, in fact, beginning to move in the opposite direction.

Teacher Pupil Relationships

An area central to the PACE research was the question of whether the imposition of external requirements on teachers as embodied in the National Curriculum and assessment procedures would affect the relationships between teachers and children.

Would the 'loss of fun', referred to by one teacher above, and the pressure to relate everything to planned National Curriculum topics affect the warm, informal relations which many teachers had previously seen as lying at the heart of good English primary practice?

When asked in May 1990 if they felt that the quality of teacher-pupil relations had been affected, 45% of teachers said that there had been no change and 21% argued that they would hotly defend their existing relationship with the children against any outside influences, since it was of such central importance to the teaching/learning process. One teacher insisted ...

"I haven't let it change me. I still try to be a person for the children, someone they understand and who tries to understand them."

Another teacher in an inner city school saw it as a collective response:

"We've tried very hard not to change and I think that's where we've been torn apart to be frank. I feel very strongly that it should not change, but it's getting harder ... With our children, if they don't get a close relationship with their teacher, they won't have a relationship with anybody. And if they haven't got somebody to give them some attention at school, then they're not going to get any from anywhere else and they won't learn."

In contrast, 9% of teachers felt that there had been an improvement in the teacher-pupil relationship and suggested that the National Curriculum required them to have more contact with individual pupils. However a far greater number, (31%), felt that there had definitely been a change for the worse and that their relationship with children was affected adversely by pressures on teacher time or by feelings of stress on the part of the teachers. 14% felt that contact with children had become more formal as a result.

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A number of teachers (one fifth) expressed a feeling of sadness that things which had been seen as central to good primary practice - spontaneity, flexibility, the ability to respond to topics introduced by children and to create teaching activities around them were being eroded because of pressure to cover everything laid down in the programmes of study.

In one Local Education Authority this was widely referred to as the "dead pigeon" syndrome and there was a general feeling that the learning experiences provided by unpredictable, but immediate, child experiences - such as finding a "dead pigeon" were now having to be ignored rather than utilised in teaching. A teacher responded:

"I just feel less relaxed now. The other day one child brought in some bird's eggs, but there was so much to get through that I couldn't make time to show them to the class or talk about them. At the end of the day I still hadn't managed to show them and he burst into tears. I felt so bad ... really bad. It's terrible if we don't have time to respond to children any more."

The children's responses, when we interviewed them in the Autumn of 1990, did not convey the teachers' sense of foreboding, but they did map almost exactly onto their concerns.

In the first place, the quality of existing classroom relationships was attested by the children, with only three, out of the 48 interviewed, giving negative responses to the question, 'How do you get on with your teacher?'

To elicit their perspectives a little more, the children were then asked:

What do you like best about your teacher?

The breakdown of responses was as follows:

TABLE 7

(number of responses)

	Overall Positive	Overall Negative
Personal characteristics	4	1
Provision of interesting activities	14	1
Provision of 'easy work'	2	0
Opportunity to choose activities	10	2
Quality of interaction	11	0
Don't know	3	0
No answer	1	0

Of the three main areas of child concern - interest, choice and interaction - children said such things as:

Provision of interesting activities:

'I like my teacher best when she ...'

'does good work with us.'

'the way she reads.'

'I like her stories.'

'gives you work you like.'

'when she comes and she's doing things with us, like when she had a big table and we have all things to taste and we dip papers in and it goes different colours.'

Opportunity to choose activities:

'I like my teacher best when she ...'

'lets us play games and read books and go out to play.'

'lets us go over to dinners and we can sit by somebody.'

'says we can choose.'

'cos she lets us do painting.'

'cos she lets me play.'

Quality of interaction:

'I like my teacher best when she ...'

'says something nice, like 'Well done, Sarah.'

'bestest is that she likes doing things with us. When I can't do it, she writes it for me - helps me.'

'doesn't shout, that's when I like her.'

'when she's not mad.'

Of course, such patterns in children's concerns are not unexpected, for they are very similar to findings reported by studies such as Davies (1982) and Pollard (1985). However, in the context of teachers' concerns regarding the impact of the National Curriculum and assessment procedures, the children's views have particular force. In the future, the quality of children's experiences - measured in their own terms - will be adversely effected on grounds of **interest**, if teachers are less able to respond spontaneously to children's immediate concerns, on grounds of **choice**, if teachers feel that they must tighten their classroom control in order to 'cover' more curriculum, and on grounds of the **quality of interaction**, if teachers become stressed, preoccupied with record keeping and assessment and unable to sustain the good relationships with children which they currently achieve.

We will have soundly based indications of such future trends from the second round of data collection in 1991/2.

Conclusion

In the final question of an interview, teachers were asked to say, realistically, how they thought primary education would develop in the next 5 to 10 years. Only 15% were optimistic about the effects of the changes on primary practice in the future, arguing that the changes would lead to more collaboration amongst teachers (10%), and to a greater degree of reflection and review of practice (5%). 34% of teachers had mixed views as to how primary education would develop and 47% were pessimistic, feeling that the changes would lead to a loss of autonomy and a narrowing of the teachers' role (24%) as well as to increased teacher stress and drop-out.

Their fears for the future were balanced to some extent by the feeling of some teachers that the pace of change would eventually begin to slacken, and that what they saw as less desirable aspects of the National Curriculum and its assessment would be modified or would disappear altogether.

Further phases of the research will enable us to investigate whether or not this is the case, to look in more detail at the impact of the changes on the children themselves, and to examine teachers' views at a later stage of the implementation of ERA.